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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000076

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ISTANBUL PASS TO ADANA
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [TU](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY/GREECE: DUST UP OVER IMIA/KARDAK ISLET AND
AEGEAN TENSIONS

REF: A. ANKARA 2006 6388

[B](#). ATHENS 0080 (NOTAL)

[C](#). ATHENS 2006 2975

Classified By: DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Turkish military is downplaying a series of confrontations between Turkish Coast Guard vessels and Greek fishermen near the disputed islet of Imia/Kardak, as well as reports of air intercepts over the Aegean since mid-December. The MFA described the December encounters around Imia/Kardak as a Greek provocation designed to embarrass Turkey during EU accession talks. Press reporting here has been low key, although Turkish authorities have reportedly kept the media away from the islet. The restrained military reaction is indicative of recent progress and improved communications across the Aegean since the reciprocal CHOD visits and other exchanges late last year. While both sides worked to defuse tensions following a fatal mid-air collision in May 2006, another accident could jeopardize progress made to date. End summary.

Incursions Around Imia/Kardak Islet

[1](#)2. (U) Ankara press reports, most replaying Greek media accounts, describe a series of incidents around the rocky islets of Imia/Kardak off Turkey's Bodrum peninsula in which fishermen from both Turkey and Greece have allegedly had their nets slashed. The recent series of incidents reportedly began around December 9, subsided after several days, and resumed in early January. Press stories report that Turkish Coast Guard vessels have been operating for extended periods in what Greece considers its territorial waters near the uninhabited islands, preventing fishing vessels and pleasure craft from entering the area, and in at least one reported incident, cutting net lines of a Greek fishing boat.

F-16 Intercepts Alleged

[1](#)3. (U) The Turkish press reported that Greek jets "harassed" Turkish warplanes on training flights in what Turkey considers to be international air space at least five times in recent days. Several of the incidents allegedly involved

"dog fights" in which dangerously close contact occurred between the two countries' aircraft.

Ankara Officials Also Downplay Actions

¶4. (C) In reactions similar to those reported from Athens in ref b, Turkish military officers familiar with Aegean issues have downplayed the significance of the incidents. They have told us in recent days that they remain optimistic that confidence building measures (CBMs) discussed during the Greek and Turkish CHODS 2006 reciprocal visits (reftels a and c) and in the subsequent meeting between the Coast Guard chiefs of both countries in December 2006 were having a positive effect. Col. Oktay Bingol of the Turkish General Staff (TGS) J-5 told us on January 12 that the recent confrontations were not dangerous and that CBMs were having their intended effect of decreasing chances for accidents involving military vessels and aircraft in disputed waters and air space. Turkish Navy Plans Chief Rear Admiral Cem Gurdeniz also confirmed that CBMs are being implemented. The General Staff considers the recent incidents around Imia/Kardak to be a law enforcement issue related to fisheries, and not a security matter, he said. He noted that Turkey had deliberately kept surface interaction at the Coast Guard level and by so doing had sought to avoid any escalation. He told us that both sides understood the implications of each others' actions, and that restraint was important.

¶5. (U) Commenting to reporters on January 11 about press stories that Greek aircraft were again harassing Turkish planes, Chief of the General Staff (CHOD) GEN Yasir Buyukanit

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was upbeat, describing Turkey and Greece as having good intentions. He said that he had spoken with Greek CHOD Chinofotis on the morning of January 11, noted that it would take time to resolve problems, and stressed the need for cooperation and patience. Improvements in military ties had been achieved, he said, "but you cannot change everything in one day."

¶6. (U) The Turkish Coast Guard Command announced after the December incidents that its teams were fulfilling their regular duties and that there was "no crisis in the region." The Coast Guard statement denied that confrontations with Greek vessels had occurred around the disputed islet.

¶7. (C) MFA maritime officials with whom we spoke were more antagonistic than their military colleagues, telling us they believe the December incidents with Greek fishermen at Imia/Kardak were intentional provocations by Greece designed to embarrass Turkey on the eve of European Union discussions of Turkey's accession. Basat Ozturk in the MFA Office of Maritime Affairs complained to us that Greek aircraft were flying over the Aegean armed again, despite the fact that Turkey understood there was an agreement reached during GEN Buyukanit's visit that aircraft from both sides would patrol unarmed. Ozturk attributed the apparent disconnect between the high-level military meetings in late 2006 and the most recent incidents to lack of Greek political will to carry out the confidence building measures the military side is attempting to implement.

¶8. (C) Mehmet Poroy of the MFA Maritime Affairs office repeated charges on January 12 that the December incidents in the Aegean were an intentional provocation by Greece. Poroy told us that, as is their usual practice, the MFA had called in Greek Embassy officials to express official complaints. On alleged Turkish aircraft violations, Poroy explained that from 2001 until mid-2006, Turkey had filed air flight plans with NATO and that these were available to the Greek Air Force. In 2006, Turkey stopped filing flight plans because they "no longer served their purpose," he said. He also complained that that Greek fighters were flying armed

missions. Although he admitted that the CBMs were having a positive effect overall, Poroy said that he did not expect that the quiet bilateral talks Turkey and Greece have been holding on continental shelf boundary issues (ref b) could resume in the present atmosphere. There have been 35 rounds of talks at the undersecretary level between the two countries since March 2002, he claimed.

Comment

19. (C) Unlike the confrontation over Imia/Kardak in 1996 in which the planting of a Greek and then a Turkish flag on the rocky islet off the Turkish coast unleashed a nationalistic furor in Turkey and sharply boosted then Prime Minister Ciller's popularity, the recent incidents have elicited little popular response in Turkey and are being downplayed by TGS and other military officials. The restrained military reaction is indicative of recent progress and improved communications across the Aegean, seen particularly after the fatal F-16 collision in May 2006. An accident resulting from an air or sea encounter could still jeopardize progress, however.

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